

Human Resources: Tools to Improve Your Hiring Practices

By Beth Carroll



The ministerial staff, lay leadership and volunteers are in place. More and more people are coming to the weekly services. God is blessing. Lives are changed.

But you wonder if your ministry would be more effective if you replaced some of these volunteer positions with employees. Consider the following questions to help you decide if it is time to move from volunteers to employees:

- Can you count on the volunteers to follow through when they commit?
- Do you have volunteers who are overworked?
- Do your volunteers have the skill sets that you need?

As you contemplate hiring employees, have any of these thoughts crossed your mind:

- “I didn’t go into the ministry for this.”
- “Bible School didn’t prepare me for...”
- “We are a church, not a business. The employment laws don’t apply to us.”

Certainly, hiring employees can be a daunting and complex task. But let me offer some best practices in areas of recruitment, screening, selection and other employment practices to help you through this process.

RECRUITMENT

Once a vacancy has been confirmed, the staffing process normally consists of the following steps:

Hiring authority: Establish who is to be the hiring authority in the search, screening and selection process. Knowledge of the job is crucial. It makes sense to involve the one who will supervise and help define the position. If you do not know the job, you are less qualified to choose the person most qualified to do the job.

Job description review: A well-written and updated job description is a very effective tool because it helps with recruitment and later to evaluate employee performance. The posting (advertising), screening, interview and selection should all be based on the job description. Organize the list from most essential duties to least essential duties, completing the list with “other duties as assigned.” Confusion and legal problems can be prevented by planning ahead.

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Application: A carefully written application makes the task of hiring much easier. It is a tool that is designed to help you find the right person. Avoid asking questions that appear to be discriminatory. Rather, ask only for information related to the applicant's ability to do the job. Include an applicant statement verifying the information and authorizing references, and don't forget to have the candidate sign their completed application. It is a legal document, so be sure to have an employment attorney review it to make sure it includes the proper waivers and disclosures, as well as complies with federal and state laws.

A resume should not be substituted for an employment application. One is created by the applicant to sell themselves; the other is a legal document, a tool to elicit facts.

It is recommended that receipt of all applications be acknowledged. It can be as simple as a postcard that expresses appreciation for their interest, and an assurance the application will be reviewed.

SCREENING

Select the candidates to be interviewed based on how their knowledge, skills, and abilities compare to the criteria described in the job description. Screen for the candidates' Christian commitment. Are their values and standards in sync with the church's values and standards?

Interview: It is a good practice to have more than one interview for comparison purposes. A structured approach is when applicants are asked the same questions, and may be easier to defend against should allegations of discrimination arise. Open-ended and behavior-based questions generally prompt the most information from the candidates. An example would be, "Give me an example of a time when your schedule was interrupted by unforeseen circumstances. How did you handle it?" Avoid questions that could be interpreted as discriminatory, such as questions about the applicant's age, sex, ethnicity, or disability.

Reference Checks: Don't rely on the written reference letters the applicant provides. Call the references yourself, but first decide what is critical to the success of the applicant in the position; such as attitude toward work, flexibility, initiative, and ability to problem solve.

Background Screening: The church has a duty to protect participants in its various programs. Because church employees have access to children participating in their ministry programs, conducting a background screening is highly recommended.

At the end of this article, I've provided a link to a list of some key resources that I recommend, including a resource for background screening.

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SELECTION

Consider this: When it comes to selecting a person for a job, if it's not job related, it should not be a factor in the decision process.

Job Offer: The offer should consist of compensation, schedule, job title, and benefits eligibility. It's also a good idea to follow up a verbal offer with a written summary once the offer has been accepted.

Once the offer has been made and accepted, other candidates should be notified as soon as possible.

Pay: It is important to make sure the compensation practices are fair, and that minimum wage and overtime requirements are met. The local labor market is a good place to check when trying to determine what the local rate of pay is for similar positions.

When deciding appropriate compensation, keep in mind compensation is provided in recognition of the responsibilities and requirements of the position (as set forth in the job description), not based specifically on the qualifications or financial obligations of a particular person.

New Employee Orientation: Orientation is how the church welcomes the new employee to their mission and culture, to the people, and to their new surroundings. It is an easy way to help your new hire get off to a good start, but it requires a little preparation. Having the work area set up and ready sends a message, "we are glad you are here!" An employee handbook is a must to effectively communicate the policies and guidelines of employment. The handbook can be used as a guide for discussion that first day, as well as a reference for the new employee later.

Orientation to the church is an ongoing process. Schedule weekly meetings to share office protocols, and introduce and discuss the duties the new employee has been assigned. Make yourself available the first several weeks to answer questions and explain preferred methods.

EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES

Basic employee relations include fairness and consistency in the treatment of employees, effective communication, documentation of employment actions, and effective performance management.

Employment Handbook: The purpose of an employment handbook is to communicate policies, benefits, work rules and expectations. Be sure to update it regularly to reflect current laws and practices. It is important to follow the procedures and policies

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consistently. If a discrimination complaint is filed against the church by a former employee, those two things will be taken into consideration.

Because of specific state and local laws, it is critical that you consult with a local employment attorney when drafting or updating policies, handbooks, employment applications, or contracts.

Performance Reviews: A performance evaluation measures the employee's goals, performance and outcomes.

Supervisors can have a significant impact in helping employees understand their role, their value to the church, and the contributions they make. Job performance evaluation is an ongoing process. There should be no "surprises" during the annual or semi-annual evaluation. Any prior issues should have been resolved at the time they occurred. It is important to keep written documentation of conversations with employees related to performance.

During a performance review, feedback should be clear and specific. Focus on performance of existing goals, and build on what the employee is doing well when setting new goals. One method is to have the employee write a self-appraisal to see if there are gaps in perception of the work being done. Unsatisfactory performance should be documented, discussed and the employee should be given opportunity to improve their performance.

Discipline and Termination: Developing and communicating clear guidelines ahead of time reduces the risk of a lawsuit later when it is necessary to discipline or ultimately terminate an employee. Document all efforts of verbal guidance and discipline to support what efforts were made to correct the situation.

It is critical to consistently follow whatever discipline steps are spelled out in the employment handbook. Normally, the severity of the infraction determines the appropriate disciplinary action to be taken, but if one employee is verbally warned about repeated absences and another employee is terminated for the same offense, the church could be accused of discrimination. Always seek legal counsel before terminating an employee.

COMPLYING WITH APPLICABLE LAWS

Regardless of the size, the church must be a responsible employer and ensure they comply with all relevant laws.

As a church employs more people, the church's legal responsibilities change. So, how do you know what laws apply? (In some cases, they are the same ones that apply to any business.)

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At the end of this article, I've provided a link to a table titled Federal Employment Laws and Religious Organizations that provides a basic overview of the many employment laws that apply to churches. Make yourself familiar with these laws!

It is impossible to anticipate every possible situation you will face as you hire and manage employees; however, implementing these basic concepts will help ensure your employment practices are effective and comply with appropriate laws.

Key Resources: [click here](#).

Employment Laws: [click here](#).

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About the Author:

Beth Carroll is the Human Resources Director at the AG National Leadership and Resource Center. She has served the organization for 25 years, with the last 11 years in the Human Resources Department. She is a member of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), which is the world's largest association devoted to human resource management. In 2005, she received the distinction of Professional in Human Resources (PHR) by the Human Resources Certification Institute.

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